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ABSTRACT

An investigation was made of the role of parents in children's acquisition of pragmatic language skills (in other words, their ability to use language appropriately in social contexts). A total of 49 middle class adults completed questionnaires; 9 were parents, 15 were teachers, 9 were both teachers and parents, and 16 were neither. The first part of the questionnaire involved a series of inquiries about eight specific pragmatic abilities. The second part included questions about the stability of both inappropriate and appropriate pragmatic behaviors. Most subjects said that parents are influential in children's acquisition of pragmatic skills. In general, subjects did not expect sex differences in the acquisition of such skills. A majority of subjects did not believe critical periods exist in which pragmatic skills must be acquired. Finally, subjects predicted that desirable pragmatic behaviors would be more stable than undesirable behaviors. (RH)

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Adult beliefs about the acquisition of pragmatic skills

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When children learn language, they must acquire more than phonology, semantics, and syntax. They must also acquire pragmatic skills, or the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts. For example, they must learn to use please and thank you, take turns when conversing, and make polite requests. Such skills promote effective social interaction with peers and adults (Becker, 1982).

As yet, virtually no research ha been conducted on the acquisition of pragmatic skills. Existing research is largely anecdotal (e.g., Barrett, 1980; Bates, 1976; Gleason, 1980). In contrast, there is an extensive literature on the acquisition of semantics and syntax which has focussed on family influences. Researchers typically correlate characteristics of the adult input with aspects of the child's developing speech. Adults are likely to have an influence on children's pragmatic skills, too.

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One preliminary way to study the role of parents in pragmatic acquisition is to assess adult beliefs about pragmatic development. This approach is suggested by work in two related areas. First, Slobin (1967) and his colleagues believed that one must interpret adult teaching behaviors in light of those adults' beliefs about language acquisition and about their own potential influence. Secondly and more recently, Goodnow (1979, 1981) has described what she calls "intellectual socialization." She maintained that parents socialize their children

to think and reason in much the same way that they socialize sex roles. Further, she argued that parental beliefs and expectations about cognitive development as well as about appropriate ways to think in the culture are reflected to some degree in how they model cognitive behaviors for children and reward and punish the cognitive behaviors of children. For example, if parents do not believe a child can take turns speaking, they might not be expected to react very negatively to the child's interruptions. Similarly, if parents do not believe they can influence a given skill, they might not be expected to intentionally model it.

In order to assess adult beliefs about pragmatic development, 49 middle-class adults completed questionnaires. Of the 49, nine were parents, 15 were teachers, nine were both parents and teachers, and 16 were neither parents nor teachers. These four groups thus represented individuals with different experiences with children. The first part of the questionnaire involved a series of questions about eight specific pragmatic abilities: saying please and thank you, using the correct volume and tone of voice, taking turns, making polite requests, using titles, explaining requests, knowing when to speak, and saying hello and goodbye. For each of these abilities, subjects were asked, for example, what are important sources of influence, reasons why an older child might lack the ability, whether there are sex differences in acquisition, whether there is a critical period for acquisition, and how important acquisition is. The second part of the questionnaire included questions about the stability of both inappropriate and appropriate pragmatic behaviors in general.

Although about half of the questions were open-ended, and thus

subjectively coded, reliability of coding was high. The lowest level of inter-rater agreement on any one question was .86. The overall level of inter-rater agreement was .94.

There was remarkable similarity among the responses of subjects in all four groups. The most striking finding was that most subjects believed that parents teach pragmatic skills. This belief was reflected in subjects' responses to three questions. First, parents were seen as the most important source of influence in the acquisition of all of the eight skills. For the eight skills, between 73 and 92% of the subjects identified parental influences, placing parents ahead of children's natural tendencies, teachers, peers, and institutions. Second, parents and the general learning environment in the home were seen as responsible for older children's pragmatic incompetence. That is, between 62 and 90% of the subjects cited poor parenting or a poor learning environment as precluding proper development of the eight skills. Third, subjects viewed children essentially as "tabula rasas" with respect to pragmatic development, as being largely open to their learning experiences rather than being predisposed to either politeness or rudeness. Again, parents were seen as the providers of such learning experiences. For example, one woman explained, "My friends who are polite come from parents who stressed this as important and my friends who are rude, their parents have terrible manners also." Another subject said, "If the child's parents or guardians won't guide their children to be polite and use the right language and if . . . the parents don't do the same, the kids will end up being rude most of their lives and pass it on." In terms of the literature, anecdotal findings suggest that parents are very influential, especially because many pragmatic skills are acquired prior

to formal schooling.

Another finding of my study is that most subjects noted no sex differences in the acquisition of any of the pragmatic skills. On only two skills did any group suggest a difference and that was in favor of girls. While no sex differences have yet been found in pragmatic behaviors, the superiority of girls in syntactic and semantic performance has been well-documented.

In addition to believing that there are no sex differences, no group believed that there are critical periods for the acquisition of any of the abilities. When asked whether there is an age after which it is too late to acquire the eight abilities, most subjects said no. They explained that it is never too late to learn from ones experiences.

Finally, all groups stated that desirable pragmatic behaviors are more stable than undesirable behaviors. That is, most subjects believed that children with good pragmatic skills will retain them, while children with poor pragmatic skills are more open to change. Goodnow (1981) has also observed this optimistic assessment of other developmental domains by her subjects.

Let me briefly summarize the findings I have discussed:

1. Most subjects said that parents are most influential in children's acquisition of pragmatic skills.
2. In general, subjects did not expect sex differences in the acquisition of pragmatic skills.
3. A majority of the subjects did not believe there are critical periods in which pragmatic skills must be acquired.

and 4. The subjects predicted that desirable pragmatic behaviors would be more stable than undesirable pragmatic behaviors.

The results of the study show that adults have remarkably similar and accurate ideas about the development of a variety of pragmatic skills. Interestingly, the beliefs do not appear to vary significantly as a function of amount or type of experience with children. That is, more experienced parents and teachers did not have importantly different beliefs from those of inexperienced adults. Goodnow (1983) has also noted that parental ideas are not clearly related to information received. Such lack of variability of expectations suggests that researchers might look elsewhere in explaining variability in children's pragmatic abilities.

Another issue meriting further research is the relation between parental beliefs and parental behaviors. There is indirect evidence supporting such a relationship. It is suggested by parallels between responses in this study and observations I have made in a longitudinal study of six families. Of the eight pragmatic skills on the questionnaire, all groups rated the appropriate use of please and thank you as most important and necessary. In addition, a majority of subjects in all groups saw it as the earliest skill to be acquired and the one over which parents have the greatest influence. I have observed that parents attempt to teach their preschoolers please and thank you far more than any other pragmatic skill. Some families keep up a litany of prompts such as "What's the magic word?" "How do you ask?" and "Did you say thank you?" Again, this evidence of a relation is indirect. While the beliefs and expectations are important in their own right, the extent to which they help structure teaching behaviors is also of interest and should be investigated.

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